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On a Mission

09.30.2009 | Faculty, Catholic Father Norbert Burns, S.M., could be *the* poster child for the Marianists.

In a campus brimming with hospitable, friendly people, the popular priest stands out for the way he personifies Marianist spirituality. He will strike up conversations with strangers. He'll greet others with a hug or a welcoming word. And wherever two or three are gathered, he's quick to remind that God is present, too.

That's why University of Dayton President Daniel J. Curran asked Burns to step out of retirement and step into a role that comes naturally to the personable priest. He's making his way around campus talking to small gatherings about his favorite subject — the Marianist charism. Last year, he gave 70 upbeat talks, striking up conversations about the Marianist style of spirituality with groups ranging from student-athletes to aerospace engineers.

During his presidency, Curran has taken a number of steps to preserve and strengthen the University of Dayton's niche as a Catholic, Marianist university. For instance, the Marianist Education Working Group has recommended ways to redesign the undergraduate curriculum, and the University has launched a Marianist Educational Associates program to develop a corps of lay faculty and administrators dedicated to preserving Marianist heritage on campus.

For Burns, this new role is an extension of his life's work, where he devoted more than six decades to the classroom. Nearly one-third of all alumni took his popular Christian marriage class.

"My spirituality is bound up in relationships with other people," he says. "Anyone who meets me is invited into the Marianist charism. I joined the Marianists because of the way they come together. It's belongingness. The spirit of Mary is the spirit of community."

Today, he continues to walk in the footsteps of the Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, who organized small faith communities of people from all walks of life (sodalities) to re-establish the Catholic church in France after the French Revolution and create the Society of Mary (Marianists).

At 86, Burns is creating what he calls "spirit communities." He invites others on campus to share in Mary's mission of forming communities of faith.

"When you come into my life for just a moment, we form a spirit community," he says. "When I meet with groups on campus, we talk about what it means for UD to be a Marianist university. We talk about seeing in other people the presence of God's gifts."

He discovered one such community among the Shroyer Park researchers and another on the men's basketball court.

"That team had such success last year because they came together as a spirit community," Burns says. "They called themselves a band of brothers."

This fall, he's already slated to talk to administrators in the dean's office in the College of Arts and Sciences and the enrollment management leadership team. To schedule a visit, send an e-mail to Norbert.Burns@notes.udayton.edu.

"I hope faculty and staff on campus realize that they're all part of the UD Marianist charism — that they'll exalt and make the most of it," he says.

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